AS English Language Text Analysis (Paper 1 Reading Skills)

Q. Read the following text, which is an extract from the memoir *Burning Lights* by Bella Chagall. Analyse the text, focusing on form, structure and language. [25 Marks]

Extract is printed in *Cambridge International As and A Level English Language Coursebook* by Mike Gould and Marilyn Rankin.

Please note the following colour-coding of key skills in my example:
Point
Evidence
Explanation

Planning: Form
- Memoir
- First person
- Present Tense
- Voice

Planning: Structure
- Spatial
- Juxtaposition
- Zoom in

Planning: Language
- Tautology
- Visual Imagery
- Asyndeton
- Personification

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The text is a memoir by Bella Chagall written for an intended audience of her fans and other readers of literary non-fiction.

In keeping with the conventions of the form the writer uses the first person point of view 'I' in order to describe an important experience and evoke an important space from her childhood, thereby creating a personal tone and drawing the reader closer to the experience. The writer also uses the present tense to create a sense of immediacy and allow the reader to explore the shop with her. She writes in the voice of her younger self to capture the child-like sense of wonder that she felt in that moment and add greater authenticity to the text.

One purpose of the text is to describe the store itself. This is done through the use of the spatial structure which follows her movement from the door of the apartment to the back store and then to the front store, thereby allowing the reader to imagine the

layout. Another technique used is that of imagery. The repetition of the word “dark” in the second stanza is offset by the lexical field of words related to light (‘glitter’, ‘silver’, ‘gold’, ‘flashing’, ‘chandeliers’) suggesting the stark contrast in the two places. Further the image of The “thick yellow sheets of paper” connotes dullness, drabness and heaviness whereas the reference to (‘glass’ and ‘mirrors’) suggests beauty, fragility and also luxury and opulence of the front shop.

Another purpose is to convey the writer’s own feelings and impressions as she is passing through the shop. The writer feels fearful and oppressed in the back shop. The use of the simile “as in a prison” suggests that she feels trapped here and wants to break out. On the other hand, the use of words like “dazzles” and “dizzy” suggests that she is spell bound by the brilliance of the objects in the front shop and creates a tone of fascination and awe.

In terms of language the writer uses several figures of speech and imagery in order to attain her purpose. The use of the lexical field of words related to glassware – glass, mirrors, chandeliers, goblets etc. – support the subject i.e. the description of the glassware shop. Moreover, the use of the asyndeton (‘goblets, wine glasses, sugar bowls, saucers’) creates a sense of abundance and suggests that the writer is fascinated by them. The repetition of the word “cupboards” at the end of the sentence, in a minor sentence in the middle and then at the beginning of a new sentence stylistically conveys that there are cupboards everywhere and that she is overwhelmed by their overpowering presence. Besides these devices there is also a sustained use of personification throughout the text. For instance, the reflections of various objects are personified (‘Wherever I move, all the objects run after me’; ‘The fire…crossing each other’) suggesting that the reflections keep changing as she moves through the store. The personification creates a playful tone and mirrors the imagination of a child that perceives the objects as chasing her and playing games with each other, rather than as being stationary and reflecting her own movements.

In terms of structure the writer uses juxtaposition in which the back store is contrasted against the front store. The repetition of the idea of blindness (‘as though I was blind’) in the back shop and (‘blinds me like fire’) emphasises the darkness in the former and sparkling brilliance of the latter. The recurring motif of the clocks also highlights the difference between the two spaces. The tautology (quiet and soundless) vis-a-vis the auditory image (being wound in my ears) suggests that the back room is a store-room where the objects lie silent and dormant but the front room is the showroom where the objects are put on show and the sound of their mechanism whirring fills the air.

The writer also uses short paragraphs among longer ones in order to zoom in on important images or turning points in the passage. For instance there is an intense focus on the mother’s voice (Is her voice quiet, calm…angry?) because it signals whether the child should proceed and marks the final barrier between the back and the front shop.

Further, the writer zooms in on the chandeliers. The use of the short paragraph and the plethora of imagery including visual (fire spatters, sparks) and auditory (humming; moan of pain) create a sense of intense focus and suggest that these objects have had a lasting impact on the memorists mind. This idea is supported by the title of the memoir “Burning Lights” which is a direct reference to the chandeliers that “burn up high”.

Finally, the writer uses a variety of sentence lengths to break the monotony and convey varied tones. For instance the use of the minor exclamatory sentence “But wait!” mimics the abrupt pause in movement and a sudden realisation that she needs to listen for cues in her mother’s voice. The use of several sentence fragments beginning with coordinating conjunctions (“And if I cat….”; “But the stuffy air..”) shows quick changes in focus and mirrors the writer’s stream of consciousness, heightening the sense that the events are unfolding “now” and the writer is directly speaking to the reader.

The register is semi-formal. The use of high frequency words renders the text accessible to the general reader and the use of the first person and stream of consciousness creates a personal tone. However, on the other hand text is packed with figurative language which adds layers of meaning and heightens the register and marks the poetic intent of the text.

Thus the writer uses several elements of form structure and language in order to describe her memory of her mother’s store.